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SUBJECT: FILM STAR SET TO SHAKE UP ANDHRA PRADESH POLITICS

REF: A) CHENNAI 028 B) 2007 CHENNAI 640

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Andhra Pradesh's media is rife with rumors that Telugu film superstar Chiranjeevi is set to form his own political party. With an enormous and dedicated fan base the action hero will immediately be a force to be reckoned with. In a recent meeting with Consulate officers, Chiranjeevi strongly hinted that he would run for public office while refusing to definitively say he would do so. Andhra Pradesh state elections will be held in May 2009, and it seems that Chiranjeevi is planning to follow in the footsteps of another Telugu film star -- NT Rama Rao -- who in 1983 handed the Congress party its first defeat in the state less than a year after entering politics himself. Chiranjeevi's entry into politics could scramble the state's politics and impact the United Progressive Alliance's chances to hold onto to its large share of Andhra Pradesh's 42 parliamentary seats in upcoming national elections.
END SUMMARY.

ANDHRA PRADESH'S MATINEE IDOL THINKING ABOUT POLITICS

¶2. (U) Chiranjeevi (actual name Konidella Sivasankara Varaprasad) has been a superstar in the Telugu language film industry since the early 1980s. One of India's highest paid actors, he has more than 140 films to his credit. He has crossed over to Hindi-language Bollywood films and has been awarded the 'Padma Bhushan,' India's third highest civilian honor. It is difficult to overstate Chiranjeevi's popularity in his native Andhra Pradesh. Rumors that Chiranjeevi planned to enter politics have periodically surfaced for years. The intensity of the rumors picked up in 2007 and people close to the actor told the media that he was considering whether to take the plunge.

¶3. (SBU) On January 23 the actor met with Consulate officers while visiting to renew his visa. Chiranjeevi said that he has been thinking of forming his own political party in light of "demands" by his fans he do so. Although he was coy, saying he had not made up his mind (and assiduously refusing to make any definitive statement on the matter), he gave strong indications that he is moving forward. Chiranjeevi told us that that his surrogates are surveying the political scene and to expect an announcement in April or May. He mentioned that in a recent visit to the U.S. he met with California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. When we responded that Governor Schwarzenegger was a good person for him to talk with about successfully transitioning from film to politics, Chiranjeevi simply smiled. (NOTE: Chiranjeevi also told us that Governor Schwarzenegger, whose plans to visit India in late 2007 were postponed, plans to visit Hyderabad in March or April. END NOTE.)

¶4. (SBU) On February 11 Pol/Econoff met with Chiranjeevi again. Chiranjeevi appeared distraught and explained that one of his fans had committed suicide. The fan left a note saying he killed himself because he could no longer stand waiting for his hero to decide

whether to enter politics. Chiranjeevi said "many people are counting on me." He added that he will decide "very soon." When asked whether there is sufficient time between now and the 2009 state elections for him to create a political party that would be competitive with the ruling Congress and the opposition Telugu Desam Party (TDP), Chiranjeevi tellingly referred to NTR -- the affectionate nickname of NT Rama Rao the Telugu film star turned politician who founded the TDP in 1982. Chiranjeevi pointed out that NTR was able to become the first non-Congress Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh less than a year after announcing his decision to form the TDP.

ANDHRA PRADESH'S OWN SCHWARZENEGGER?

¶5. (SBU) Between his massive fan base and NTR's phenomenal political rise in the 1980s, the prospect of Chiranjeevi getting into politics has fueled speculation that the actor could be the next Chief Minister. A businessman and Chiranjeevi supporter was confident that Chiranjeevi would be able to assemble an outright majority if he decides to run. He said caste considerations favor Chiranjeevi, who hails from the numerically strong Kappu community. The Kappus, who have long been politically marginalized, will readily line up behind the actor. Chiranjeevi, he said, will also draw votes from Other Backward Caste (OBC) communities aside from the Kappus. Other contacts agree that caste considerations favor Chiranjeevi and add that his film star popularity will also help.

¶6. (SBU) But political analysts have their doubts about the comparisons between Chiranjeevi and NTR. First, they say that although Chiranjeevi is extremely popular, he does not have NTR's stature. NTR, they note, played the role of numerous Hindu gods in his films where Chiranjeevi is simply an action star. They add that NTR founded the TDP at the height of discontent with more than thirty years of uninterrupted Congress control of the state; Chiranjeevi enters politics after almost two decades of frequent changes of power between Congress and the TDP. They also note that NTR came to power by promoting populist programs (especially a hugely popular two rupees per kilogram of rice offer) but that Chiranjeevi will not be able to best Congress on this front as current Chief Minister YSR Reddy (Congress) is the epitome of populism, having implemented a dizzying array of programs for the rural poor (ref B).

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: It is an open question whether Chiranjeevi will be able to achieve the quick success that NTR did. But there is no doubt that his entry would further scramble a political scene already confused by the issue of whether Andhra Pradesh's historically neglected Telangana region should become a separate state (ref A). Given the caste considerations and Chiranjeevi's huge fan base, we think that he has the potential to have a big impact on the state-level elections, especially if he is able to pull in as many TDP and Congress party defectors as his surrogates tell us they expect to draw. Still, it is far too early to say whether he could actually become Chief Minister. It will be hard for him to win or get through electoral alliances the 148 out of 294 seats in the state assembly he needs. With respect to Andhra Pradesh's 42 parliamentary seats, Chiranjeevi evidenced little interest in the national political scene in our conversations with him, focusing singularly on the possibility of being Chief Minister.

History dictates that his fledgling party will need to join with one of the national political alliances in order to be competitive for parliamentary seats. For the time being, he is saying that he will not join with Congress, TDP, or the Bharatiya Janata Party. But, if he does ultimately jump into politics, that position will have to change as the parliamentary elections draw near. END COMMENT.

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